



Adalgisa Giorgio (ed.), *Writing Mothers & Daughters. Renegotiating the Mother in Western Narratives by Women*

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One of the key-sentences appearing in the long and dense introduction of *Writing Mothers and Daughters* epitomizes the basic assumption on which this volume is built: “[...]it appears that the mother-daughter dyad is still the dominant structuring principle of female identity in Western cultures”. In editing this volume, Giorgio keeps this basic issue well in mind, trying to provide a broad though precise analysis of the problem on the background of different European cultures and literatures. While trying out possible critical methods, she maintains that the much debated concepts of nation, national identity, and citizenship are unavoidably involved in her approach to Western narratives by women. Her position is made clear at once: though in her awareness of the relevance and weight of globalisation in the evolution of current cultures, she re-states the relevance of national traditions in negotiating the mutual roles of mother and daughter today, and, more on the background, the drive towards keeping a “national difference” in the context of a world “going global”. This is all the more visible in the case of supposedly universal issues, which nevertheless are to be considered according to the way they are described, represented and approached in the frame of national cultures. The notions of displacement, exile, nomadism and nostalgia are crucial in dealing with the female profile in itself, and they have a lot to do with women as marginal entities in the social context. At the same time, each national context normalises the female diversity and marginality in different ways that result from each particular tradition and, therefore, produce a specific impact on the literary creation.

The clearly stated purpose Giorgio pursues is threefold:

1. “to provide a hitherto lacking systematization of a substantial body of narratives on the mother-daughter relationship in each country or language”;
2. “to identify the specificities of each individual body of texts with reference to internal cultural diversities as well as to a specific national literary tradition”



3. "to chart new territory for further investigation of texts, both within and across the national boundaries"

The selection of countries that are referred to includes all "Western European" nations. Giorgio, however, acknowledges the ambiguity of this definition, admitting that this is a "convenient term to cover a number of European literatures that share an investment in certain women's issues". The period of the analysis broadly covers the past thirty years, understanding this time-span as a moment of fast changes both in general and in terms of the mother/daughter relation.

Such a complex analysis obviously requires well-devised critical tools. Giorgio's theoretical apparatus goes to the 1970s as the moment when "the mother was put on trial for her complicity with patriarchal norms and for being the agent of their perpetuation, for holding back the daughter's process of individuation, for acting as a regulator of her sexuality, and generally for hindering her emancipation and autonomy". Later critical positions went a step further, and criticism developed in 1980s and 1990s moved towards a reappraisal of the maternal figure in the light of highly mobile relationships in the family and the consequent revision of some female and male stereotypes. The range of critical references Giorgio mentions and examines in her introduction is huge. She identifies three texts – A. Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), A. Walker's "In Search of our Mothers" (1984) and S. De Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) - as the ones marking a starting point by variously investigating and relating the figure of the mother to the patriarchal law. Then she moves on, carefully illustrating and relating some basic critical profiles (and issues) in the field of gender studies (Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva, Weil, Mitchel, Harendt,)), with an eye to the often neglected Italian context (Muraro e Cavarero, among others, and the fruitful experience of *Diotima*) and the more recent positions of Melanie Klein, Nancy Chodorow, Suleiman.

The concluding section of Giorgio's introduction - "Contextualising Mother-Daughter relationships: cultural and literary representations" – draws some interesting and quite original conclusions about the interweaving influences of national spirit and patriarchal tradition in the definition of the female profile in the interlinked roles of mother and daughter, noting for example that "In Spain and Ireland, maternal politics has been subordinated to nationalist political agendas, creating a repressive maternal imaginary with which the daughter must necessarily come into conflict".

Christine Arkininstall refers precisely to Spain, mostly focussing on the issue of history in women writers (Mercé Rodoreda, Ana Maria Matut, Elena Quiroga, Rosa Chacel, Martin Gaité, Mercedes Formica). The intimate, controversial notion of how mothers and daughters relate is linked to the shared reflection on Franco's regime and the need to keep memory and tradition throughout an authoritarian regime. Arkininstall's long chapter is the first of a series devoted to national literatures. It replicates the dialectics globalisation vs national specificity that Giorgio mentions in her introduction and that becomes particularly relevant in the diachronic perspective, that is in the way the female profile has been articulated through time.



Fogarty, while approaching Irish contemporary literature and considering several women writers (Mary Lavin, Julia O'Faolain, Deirdre Madden, Edna O'Brien, Mary Morrissey, Maeve Kelly, Lia Mills), reinforces the idea that "A predominantly patriarchal view of culture has relegated women's writing to the margins, rendering it almost invisible, and concerned itself solely with tracing lines of continuity between male artists" The sharp, popularly shared control of the Catholic Church has contributed to feed the prejudices about the malign force of maternal power, producing a hidden female horizon that is still to be unveiled.

The same Catholic background, that coalesces around the profile of the Madonna with child, moulds the Italian imagination of the mother-and-daughter relation. In the 1970s, several women writers (O.Fallaci, G.Lagorio, D.Maraini, L.Ravera, R.Loy, F.Durante) tried to revise some recurring stereotypes, producing a different version of the woman that was to be developed by younger novelists. Giorgio focuses on a number of authors (F.Ramondino, E.Ferrante, F.Sanvitale, M.T.DiLascia, C.Sereni, C.Cerati, T.Merlin, E.Stancanelli, L.De Luca, L.Bosio) interestingly including among them also E.Morante, with a specific reference to an early novel of hers, *Menzogna e sortilegio*.

The French experience, analysed by A.Hugues, is typified by a very advanced theoretical reflection interlacing with autobiographical narratives and fictional narrations. Hugues therefore goes back to famous memoirs (S.De Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une fille range* and Violette Leduc's *Ravages*), but she also tackles what she defines « the colonial tales » (Marie Cardinal and Marguerite Duras) and the narratives of female Maghrebian immigrants (*beurs*), among which Djura and Marie Redonnet.

Exile, nomadism, marginality and not-belonging combine also in Splendore's huge overview of recent British fiction written by women and focussing on the mother/daughter relation. Splendore starts from Doris Lessing and gets to Jeanette Winterson and Zoe Wicomb, selecting several relevant profiles in between (Carolyn Steedman, Drusilla Modjeska, Lisa St Aubin de Teran, Emma Tenant, Kate Atkinson and others) and she seems to identify the firm ground all these writers stand on: the shared need "to overcome the binary opposition of either conservative, authoritarian, manipulative or all-caring, sacrificing, self-denying mothers, later generations of authors have shown mothers as socially harassed, incompetent, and uncaring human beings".

In her articulated analysis of German and Austrian literatures, Chris Weedon acutely moves among many different versions of the mother/daughter relationship, again relating the female profile to the need to face, recover, rebuild personal and collective memory (Helma Sanders Brahm, Christa Wolf, Helga Novak, Jutta Heinrich, Waltraud Anna Mitgusch, Elfriede Jelinek, Kerin Struck). Curiously enough, the most interesting section is the one concerning destructive mothers, a much meaningful profile to conclude this interesting and varied volume.

Clearly enough, Giorgio – both as an editor and as an author - approaches a highly mobile and evolving field of study, suffering from impact of the changing profile of the traditional family (unmarried couples, single parents, gay families and so on). Still, the idea of a family holds – it seems – as the most effective environment where children are to be conceived and raised. At least so it seems, if one considers the dystopian, science



fictional imaginations Giorgio mentions towards the end of her introduction. Mitchinson and Merrill, Russ, Piercy and others, though setting their stories in an imaginary possible future, still reflect the current debates on possible revision of the mother-daughter relationship, suggesting what the mothers may become, and how their daughters will be.

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